

УДК 81'255.2:821.111-1(73)

**Rhythmical Principles of Walt Whitman's
Poetry Underlying the Approach to Translation
into Russian of the 'Leaves of Grass'
(as Exemplified by the Poem
Once I Pass'd Through a Populous City)**

Irina V. Nikitina*

*Nizhny Novgorod State Linguistic University
named after N.A. Dobrolyubov
31a Minin Str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603155, Russia*

Received 05.11.2013, received in revised form 10.12.2013, accepted 27.12.2013

The article discusses an alternative approach to translation of the 'Leaves of Grass' by Walt Whitman into Russian which is thought to ensure most accurate transfer of 'the essential model' of Whitman's verse. For illustrative purposes the author analyzes the poem 'Once I Pass'd through a Populous City' in line with the fundamental rhythmical principle and consequently offers his own translation version.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, rhythmical principles, rhythm of thought, phonetic recurrence.

Walt Whitman has never outlined the principles on which his system of versification is built¹, he rather hinted at them in his poetic theory. It wouldn't be difficult to enumerate those *cues* – they serve the basis for interpretations provided by researchers of his prosody:

1. He has no art except the art of nature – 'the only complete, actual poem' (Whitman, 2002: 772).

2. His 'form has strictly grown from [his – *I.N.*] purports and facts, and is the analogy of them' (Whitman, 2002: 660).

3. He is very careful and thorough about choosing the words² and determining the length of the lines (Allen, 1935: 220).

It cannot go unnoticed that only the last of them has some practical value for us. The first two clues are so broad and general in terms of interpretation that they can hardly be of any use while working out an approach to translation of the 'Leaves of Grass'.

In solving the translation problem set out in the article we shall rely on conclusions drawn by researchers from practice. Of undoubted interest for us is a conclusion made by an American professor Bliss Perry in 1960: for Whitman 'essential model... was the rhythmical pattern of the English Bible... [in which he] found the charter for the book he wished to write' (Perry, 1906: 96).

© Siberian Federal University. All rights reserved

* Corresponding author E-mail address: irene.nikitina@gmail.com

We do not set ourselves a goal to figure it out whether Whitman borrowed his poetic technique from the Bible or was guided by intuitive principles thus defending his own, most natural for him style of versification³. Something else is more important for us: the Old Testament avails us of such rhythm-formative principles that provide an opportunity to analyze and interpret Whitman's prosody and which we reckon shall determine the ultimate approach to translation of the 'Leaves of Grass'.

So the first and fundamental rhythmical principle is that of parallel structure. Whitman's line is a rhythmical unit, each line is balancing its predecessor, and completing or supplementing its meaning. Such 'parallelism' G.W. Allen called 'a rhythm of thought'.

In the usual sense the word 'rhythm' is used in poetry with regards to regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. However in the general sense rhythm means repetition, reiteration of identical elements, processes... Repetition of thoughts, ideas in a poetic text in accordance with a particular scheme also represents some rhythm, and such repetition will actually be perceived by a reader as a rhythm once his mind has been trained for such perception.

The second core rhythmical principle of the 'Leaves of Grass' is a technique that Allen called 'phonetic recurrence'. A rhythmical sound pattern created through a variety of phonetic recurrences has different manifestations in the text space of the 'Leaves of Grass': in some instances it is easily discernible, but other times it is hardly distinguishable.

The given research does not imply detection of those principles that subordinate a combination of thought rhythm and phonetic rhythm – that is unachievable through the example of one short poem. However it is beyond dispute that parallel thoughts in the 'Leaves of Grass' generally acquire a parallel means of expression at the

level of phonetic recurrences and grammatical structures.

When choosing an approach to translation of the 'Leaves of Grass' into Russian the issue of rendering the rhythm of Whitman's verse seemed to have never been made the cornerstone by Russian translators⁴. Let us consider the example of the poem entitled 'Once I Pass'd through a Populous City' to see how far K. Chukovsky moves away from rhythmical principles of Whitman's verse, and whether adherence to these principles is enough to outline the approach to translation in general.

Once I Pass'd through a Populous City

*Once I pass'd through a populous city imprinting my
brain for future use with its shows,
architecture, customs, traditions,*

*Yet now of all that city I remember only a woman I
casually met there who detain'd me for
love of me,*

*Day by day and night by night we were together--all
else has long been forgotten by me,*

*I remember I say only that woman who passionately
clung to me,*

Again we wander, we love, we separate again,

Again she holds me by the hand, I must not go,

*I see her close beside me with silent lips sad and
tremulous.*

K. Chukovsky offered the following translation of the poem:

Однажды, когда я проходил городом

*Однажды, когда я проходил по большому,
многолюдному городу, я пытался*

*внедрить в свою память его улицы, здания, обычаи,
нравы,*

*Но теперь я забыл этот город, помню лишь некую
женщину,*

*которую я случайно там встретил, и она удержала
меня,*

потому что полюбила меня.

*День за днем, ночь за ночью мы были вдвоем, – все
остальное я давно позабыл,*

*Помню только ее, эту женщину, которая
страстно прилеплась ко мне,*

*Опять мы блуждаем вдвоем, мы любим, мы
расстаемся опять,*

*Опять она держит меня за руку и просит, чтобы
я не уходил,*

*Я вижу ее, она рядом со мною, ее грустные губы
молчат и дрожат.*

The solution to the problem of rendering the rhythm of Whitman's verse implies no searching for some most subtle regular patterns of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. Whitman has never been into that: 'I have never given any study merely to expression: it has never appealed to me as a thing valuable or significant in itself' (Allen, 1935: 218). Elsewhere he further clarifies: '... what I am after is the content not the music of words. Perhaps the music happens – it does no harm' (Traubel, 1906: 163). The following explanation of Whitman quoted by H. Traubel also casts some light on Whitman's attitude to the rhythm in his verse: '... rhythm and uniformity he will conceal in the roots of his verses, not to be seen of themselves, but to break forth loosely as lilacs on a bush, and to take shapes compact, as shapes of melons, or chestnuts, or pears' (Traubel, Bush, and Harned, 1893: 16). If we compare the above statements by Whitman we can after G.W. Allen conclude that the 'intangible' Whitman's rhythm is actually his rhythm of thought. And for this rhythm to freely break through, for any prepared reader to perceive the rhythm of thought (and for the translator to render it as well) it is crucial to grasp the principles of text arrangement, the nature of its content movement.

The goal of the translator in this case is not only to preserve the communicatively meaningful semantic core of the original text, but

also to accurately reproduce all 'building blocks of meaning' (V.N. Komissarov) without breaking their sequence and more importantly hierarchical relationships. Each line⁵ shall be treated not just as an integral unit of the arrangement, but as a functional unit – a linguistic unit characterized by communicative intent included into the situation or text. In the given context this will be not just the text of the poem under consideration, but the text space of the 'Leaves of Grass' in general⁶. Such actualization of the line implies thematic-rhematic structuring of its content.

Let us get down to line-by-line analysis of the poem with an emphasis on thematic-rhematic relations. Those linguistic means using which thematic-rhematic arrangement of lines is highlighted will undoubtedly be of primary importance for us.

Communicative intent of the **first** line is determined through its inclusion into the context of the 'Open Road' which is deemed to be one of the most determinant in the 'Leaves of Grass'⁷. The thematic part of the line '*Once I*' is represented by the subject group. The fact that the subject (first person pronoun '*I*') is the core of the plot scheme in the 'Leaves of Grass' attributes higher degree of thematicity to it⁸. The syntactical element '*Once*' is becoming thematic due to its primary position in the line. The rhematic part (rheme) comprises the rest of the line which informs us about passing through a populous city ('*through*' since the road is open at both ends) with a certain aim in mind. The rheme is a group with predicate '*passed*' characterized by high rhematicity due to its semantic completeness conditioned by the context⁹.

When rendering this line the translator introduces new words lacking any correlation with the original: '*когда*', '*большому*', '*я пытался*' which actually distort thematic-rhematic relationships. As a result we get a thematic part with a subordinate clause of time:

‘Однажды, когда я проходил по большому, многолюдному городу, я...’. Thus while in the original the syntactic element ‘I’ has higher thematicity than ‘Once’ (as undoubtedly confirmed through intonation), in translation the adverbial modifier ‘Однажды’ becomes more thematic and draws over intonational stress due to the subordinate clause of time which causes this shift. Speaking about the predicate ‘pass’d’ it also loses its operating effect after becoming a part of the subordinate clause. When translating the participle ‘imprinting’ with a compound verbal predicate ‘пытался внедрить’ (i.e. compelled oneself to memorize) the translator gets into collision with the context. Proceeding from the general situation, any compulsion is out of the question – the poet is invariably gazing at houses, or streets with ‘loving and thirsting eyes’ (Whitman, 2002: 139). Besides, when rendering the rheme of the first line the translator missed out one of the components of the original semantic structure – ‘for future use’. Obviously after distorting the thematic-rhematic arrangement of the first line, and consequently the nature of its content movement, its idea, the translator thus reduced its operating effect in the first place and secondly violated its rhythmic and melodic harmony, its intonation.

Whitman is making the thematic part of the **second** line, as compared to the first one, more detailed implying that he no longer has a notion to report something new about the city: ‘Yet now of all that city I’. The rheme is composed of a group with the predicate ‘remember’¹⁰. The syntactical element ‘woman’ introduced through this predicate due to rhematic signals, which are the particle ‘only’ and the syntactic structure beginning with ‘who’, is becoming no less significant than the predicate itself.

In translation the thematic part of the second line is folded up into three words – ‘но теперь я’. The rheme is built on the antithesis ‘забыл’ –

‘помню’, thus using the predicate ‘забыл’ which has no match in the original the translator creates internal antithetic parallelism¹¹. So whereas Whitman is making the best use of the line-by-line antithetic parallelism – the second line denies or contrasts the first (*once – yet, populous – only, city – woman*), the translator through reducing the operating effect of the first line, and as a result of introducing the internal antithetic parallelism into the second line and ignoring the opposition ‘populous’ – ‘only’ (the epithet ‘большой’ is clearly superfluous, it is not counterbalanced by the subsequent line, while the syntactical element ‘некую’ is too neutral) actually blurs this effect, and consequently loses Whitman’s rhythm of thought in its broad aspect – at the interline level.

Analysis of the **third and fourth** lines of the original poem suggests line-by-line synonymous parallelism – each succeeding line enforces its predecessor by repeating the thought. The third line – through internal antithetic parallelism confirmed by punctuation ‘–’, the fourth – through persistent ‘I say’ acting as a means of special stress bearing the impress of the emotional emphasis. In the fourth line Whitman exhausts the theme of ‘city’ – ‘woman’ conflict. Syntactical elements ‘I say’, ‘only’, ‘who’ are the signals of high-degree rhematicity in the message ‘remember a woman’.

The translator neglected Whitman’s ‘I say’ and used its own rhematic signal – demonstrative pronoun ‘её’. This has led to a decrease in rhematicity of the predicate verb ‘помню’, whereas the object ‘женщину’ introduced through it gained its significance. Thus having distorted the thematic-rhematic arrangement of the line the translator also distorted its internal rhythm of thought, its intonation.

In the final lines (lines 5, 6 and 7) Whitman elaborates on the memories of his persona about the woman. The relationship between these lines is arranged on the basis on climactic parallelism¹²

or in other words '*ascending rhythm*' – each succeeding line adds up to the previous one making the thought more vivid.

Upon the whole the translation manages to render the climactic parallelism of this text fraction, i.e. the original thought rhythm is preserved at the interline level. The internal parallelism of the fifth line is rendered as well. By introducing the predicate '*просит*' and hereafter the object clause with the conjunction '*чтобы*' the translator thus replaces an implicit message coming from the woman and perceived by the persona as '*I must not go*' with an explicit one – '*и просит, чтобы я не уходил*'. Here we encounter the case of redundant translation. Consequently the rhythmical and melodic order of the line turned to be different from the original.

While rendering the seventh line the translator through pronouns '*она*', '*ее*', which have no counterparts in the original text, distorts the nature of the content development. It becomes obvious, if we break up this line into groups of parallel ideas we shall get the following arrangement: '*I see her / close beside me / with silent lips sad and tremulous*'. So the basic statement is made first: '*I see her*', then the statement is expanded: '*close beside me*' and '*with silent lips sad and tremulous*'. Within the seventh line the translator creates synthetic parallelism¹³ which is lacking in the original thus slacking the verse movement which in turn reduces the efficiency of the climactic parallelism completing the poem (the last three lines).

The above analysis allows the following conclusion: Whitman's rhythm of thought is a sophisticated rhythmical scheme; generally speaking it is a line-by-line parallelism, the type of which is determined by the nature of relations between the lines, in the narrow sense it is internal parallelism determined by the nature of content movement within the line. Although line-by-line

analysis is playing a crucial role in the 'Leaves of Grass', still the above analysis shows that internal parallelism is not an accidental phenomenon with Whitman – it contributes to the maximum final effect in creating a rhythmical scheme of the poem. Rendering of parallelism or thought rhythm of the original shall constitute a top-priority task for the translator. Adherence to this fundamental principle of the 'Leaves of Grass' implies most accurate conveyance of the original meaning and its rhythmically structured content. To our mind all the other problems related to the translation of the original – at imaginative, stylistic levels – shall be solved in keeping with this key rhythmical principle. It is noteworthy in this respect that putting emphasis on rendering the roughness of the style (Chukovsky's translation) means intentional disregarding of the 'essential model' of Whitman's verse.

While studying Whitman's prosody G.W. Allen concludes – the rhythm of thought in the 'Leaves of Grass' 'produces a phonetic recurrence' (Allen, 1935: 221), i.e. in Whitman's verse (in the Old Testament likewise) two rhythms are possible: rhythm of thought and rhythm of sounds. Actually Whitman himself is highlighting this: '... half-tints, and even less than half-tints' bear some message (Whitman, 2002: 660). The nature of relations between these rhythms is undoubtedly of interest to the translator of the 'Leaves of Grass', however here we have no opportunity to conduct some reasonable analysis of such relations – principles underlying combinations of thought rhythm and phonetic recurrence shall be identified based on longer poetic texts. It may be just noted that the poem under consideration proves that parallel thoughts in the 'Leaves of Grass' tend to bear phonetic recurrences, i.e. Whitman's parallelism like biblical parallelism requires such a formal method as a phonetic recurrence. Phonetic recurrence '*me*' is quite clearly traced in Whitman's poem –

it chiefly determines the rhythmic sound pattern of the poem. This recurrence is mostly felt with the final word of the line. Analogy to the Psalms is transparent:

*O Lord my God, in Thee have I put my hope: save me
from all them that persecute me, and deliver me.*

*The pangs of death compassed me, and the floods of
iniquity sore troubled me.*

*The pangs of Hades compassed me about; the snares
of death prevented me.*

*Yea, though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me.*

Thy rod and Thy staff, they have comforted me.

*Thou hast prepared a table before me, in the presence
of them that trouble me.*

*Thou hast anointed my head with oil, and like the best
wine doth Thy cup inebriate me.*

Moreover Whitman follows another rule of the Old Testament: it is well-known that biblical climactic parallelism is characterized by borrowing words from the previous line. It is easy

to see that with climactic parallelism (lines 5, 6 and 7) Whitman generates phonetic recurrence 'again'.

The above analysis suggests the following translation to the poem:

**Однажды я проходил
через многолюдный город**

*Однажды я проходил через многолюдный город,
отпечатывая впрок в своем мозгу его зрелища,
здания, обычаи, нравы,*

*А теперь из всего того города я помню только
женщину, случайно встреченную, которая
удержала меня из-за любви ко мне,*

*День за днем и ночь за ночью мы были неразлучны –
все прочее не оставило и следа во мне,*

*Я помню, говорю вам, только эту женщину, что
страстно прижималась ко мне,*

*Вновь мы блуждаем вдвоем, мы сливаемся, мы
разлучаемся вновь,*

*Вновь она держит меня за руку, я не должен
уходить,*

*Я вижу ее рядом, так близко, с безмолвными
губами, печальную и дрожащую.*

¹ We find it justifiable to talk about the system of versification or prosody of Walt Whitman since all of his poetic technique was based on an intent to set up a new "school" of American prosody.

² 'I take a good deal of trouble with words...' [Traubel, 1906: 163].

³ Citing Whitman Traubel wrote: 'Nature may have given the hint to the author of the 'Leaves of Grass', but there exists no book or fragment of a book which can have given the hint to them [sic]' [Traubel, 1906: 16].

⁴ The conclusion was made based on the Russian edition of the 'Leaves of Grass' published in 1970.

⁵ The fact that Whitman's line shall be treated as a separate unit is confirmed through punctuation as well.

⁶ Whitman was known to state that his 'Leaves of Grass' 'when complete should be a unity, in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body, (senses, soul, head, trunk, feet, blood, viscera, man-root, eyes, hair) or that a perfect musical composition is' [Whitman, 2002: 783].

⁷ Situation and context serve as a powerful means to neutralize any systemic-linguistic oppositions.

⁸ Thematicity and rhematicity are gradable, can be of higher or lower degree.

⁹ To take to your use out of the compact cities as you pass through,

To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go <...>

To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls [Whitman, 2002: 133]

Allons! the road is before us!

<...> my own feet have tried it well... [Whitman, 2002: 134]

¹⁰ Owing to its predicative nature the personal verb is usually rhematic.

¹¹ Antithetical parallelism – the second line denies or contrasts the first. Internal parallelism rests entirely on rhythmical principles underlying the line-by-line analysis.

¹² Climactic parallelism – each succeeding line adds to its predecessor, usually taking up words from it and completing it.

¹³ Synthetic or cumulative parallelism – the second line, or several consecutive lines, supplements or completes the first.

References

1. Allen, G.W. American Prosody. American Book Company, 1935. 342 p.
2. Perry, B. Walt Whitman. A Biography. Houghton: Mifflin and Company, 1906. 318 p.
3. Traubel, H. With Walt Whitman in Camden. *March 28-July 14, 1888. Volume I.* Boston: Small, Maynard & Boston, 1906. 473 p.
4. Traubel, Bush and Harned. In re Walt Whitman. Philadelphia: David McCay, 1893. 220 p.
5. Whitman, W. *Leaves of grass and other writings: authoritative texts, prefaces, Whitman on his art, criticism.* New York: A Norton critical edition, 2002. 919 p.

Ритмообразующие принципы поэзии У. Уитмена как основа подхода к переводу на русский язык «Листьев травы» (на примере стихотворения *Once I Pass'd through a Populous City*)

И.В. Никитина

*Нижегородский государственный лингвистический
университет им. Н.А. Добролюбова
Россия, 603155, Н. Новгород, ул. Минина, 31а*

*В статье рассматривается вариант подхода к переводу «Листьев травы» на русский язык, который, как предполагается, способен обеспечить максимально точную передачу «сущностной модели» уитменовского стиха. В качестве примера автор анализирует стихотворение *Once I Pass'd through a Populous City* в русле основополагающего ритмообразующего принципа и, как результат этого анализа, предлагает собственный вариант перевода.*

Ключевые слова: Уолт Уитмен, ритмообразующие принципы, ритм мысли, фонетический повтор.
